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Justice admits OK of prison interview

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Justice Department officials overruled State Department objections last month and allowed a Soviet journalist to interview an Italian prisoner linked to the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, a Justice Department spokesman said yesterday.

The decision to grant the interview followed heated interagency debate and was made by criminal division officials. Those officials did not consult senior Justice Department officials who said yesterday they would have opposed the interview, administraton sources said.

The Italian prisoner, Francesco Pazienza, has been awaiting extradition to Italy at a federal prison in New York since last March. He faces fraud charges.

"Mr. Pazienza is well known to be a person of disinformation," Justice Department spokesman John K. Russell said in an interview. "We don't like what prisoners say sometimes, but we live with it."

Mr. Pazienza has denied any involvement in the attempt to assassinate the pope. But his interviewer in early January, Soviet reporter Iona Andronov, reportedly has been a major source of Soviet propaganda linking Mr. Pazienza and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to the attack on the pope.

Administration sources, who declined to be identified, said the State Department objected to the interview on grounds that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union should be based on strict reciprocity.

"The Soviets wouldn't allow American journalists to conduct interviews in the Lubyanka," one official said. The Lubyanka is Moscow's main prison.

Mr. Andronov wrote two Soviet magazine articles based on his prison interview in which he charged that Mr. Pazienza coached papal assailant Mehmet Ali Acga into implicating Bulgarian security officials in the plot. He also is the author of a book charging that the CIA instigated the attack in a conspiracy involving the right-wing terrorist group the Gray Wolves.

Mr. Andronov could not be reached for comment.

Public efforts to hide a Bulgarian connection in the 1981 shooting "is now the major disinformation operation of the Soviets," said one administration official, who requested anonymity.

Through Mr. Andronov's book and a book with an identical thesis, authored by French leftist Christian Roulette, the Soviets have undertaken a propaganda campaign in the international leftist press to link Acga's assassination attempt to the CIA and the Gray Wolves, the official said.

The conspiracy trial in Rome of seven Bulgarians and Turks charged with complicity in the attack is expected to conclude within the next few weeks.

Italian prosecutors last month questioned Mr. Roulette about files he allegedly received from Mr. Pazienza, and Mr. Roulette was forced to admit Mr. Pazienza had not supplied any files that clear the Bulgarians of involvement with Agca.

Mr. Russell said State and Justice department officials strongly disagreed on the decision to allow Mr. Andronov to interview Mr. Pazienza, a former aide to the head of the Italian military security service.

State Department legal official Louis J. Links would not comment on the case.

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